"The Education of Henry Adams" a Delightful Autobiography

WHEN the announcement went out from Washington on March 27, 1918, that Henry Adams was dead we imagine that comparatively few newspaper readers realized that the notice recorded the death of one of the most competent and scholarly historians which this country has ever produced. His name was known, it is true, to hundreds of visitors to the capital who had admired the superb Saint Gaudens memorial to his wife in the Rock Creek Cemetery—the beautiful figure representing Grief, but none of his writings contain any appeal to popularity, so their circulation was limited, notwithstanding the fact that he devoted a long life to historical and literary pursuits. A story was recently printed in the New York *Times* to the effect that when the late President Angell reproached him for having ceased to write Mr. Adams responded: "My historical writings have already cost me $60,000. I think I have done my share."

No family in America can boast a more distinguished ancestry than the Adams family. The father of Henry Adams was Charles Francis Adams, Sr., our Minister to England during the civil war; his grandfather was John Quincy Adams, the sixth President of the United States, and his great-grandfather was John Adams, second President. Charles Francis Adams, Jr., his older brother, was also a man of military, political and literary distinction. In the war of secession he rose from the rank of a Lieutenant in the Union Army to that of a Colonel of cavalry; he was the first Railroad Commissioner of Massachusetts and an authority on railway management; and he was the author of numerous valuable monographs on historical subjects. Best of all, he also left an autobiography, which for brilliancy and piquancy has only been equalled by the book which is the subject of this article.

Life Was His Educator.

As the title of his book indicates, Henry Adams regarded his education and his life as one and the same thing. Education, in the largest sense, begins with a man's birth and does not end until he dies. His mother was a Brooks, and he was known at first as Henry Brooks Adams, but he abandoned the use of the middle name, his younger brother being named Brooks Adams. Henry Adams was born in Boston in 1838, and was graduated at Harvard College at the age of 20. While his father was Minister to England he acted as his private secretary. After his return from London he became assistant professor of history at Harvard and also editor of the *North American Review* for a period of six or seven years, until 1877, when he removed to Washington, where he resided during the rest of his life, devoting himself in a somewhat leisurely way to literary pursuits.

His first essay in biography was a *Life of Albert Gallatin* (Lippincott, 1879), and a little later he contributed a spirited but not overfriendly life of *John Randolph of Roanoke* to the American Statesmen Series (Houghton Mifflin, 1882). His most elaborate, scholarly and valuable work, however, is his *History of the United States*, in nine volumes, dealing with the administrations of Jefferson and Madison and covering the period of the War of 1812 (Scribners, 1889-91). Wholly different in style and spirit is *Mont Saint Michel and Chartres* (Hougthon Mifflin, 1904), a study of the thirteenth century in the light of modernism, his favorite production among all his various writings.

A Modern Mediaevalist.

Speaking of himself, he says in the present autobiography: "If history had a chapter with which he thought himself familiar it was the twelfth and thirteenth centuries." He regarded 1150 to 1250 as the period of history in which man held the highest idea of himself as a unit in a unified universe. He became convinced by long study that he could use that century, "expressed in Amiens Cathedral and the works of Thomas Aquinas, as the unit from which he might measure down to his own time, without assuming anything as true or untrue, except relation," and from that point "he proposed to fix a position for himself which he could label: *The Education of Henry Adams: A Study of Twentieth Century Multiplicity.* The outcome is the autobiography before us.

On the paper cover which envelops the book after the cleanly fashion which has come into vogue in recent years the publishers have quoted these words from Emerson: "Beware when the great God lets loose a thinker on the planet." We are confident that the author could not have sanctioned this quotation. The Adamses have long been aristocrats, but they have never been self-advertisers. Their tendency has been rather to judge themselves sternly, not to say harshly.

His Amusing Role.

When Henry Adams, after relinquishing his professorship at Harvard, determined to make Washington his home, he says: "As soon as Grant's Administration ended in 1877 and Evarts became Secretary of State Adams went back there, partly to write history, but chiefly because his seven years of laborious banishment in Boston convinced him that so far as he had a function in life it was as stable companion to statesmen, whether they liked it or not." He characterized his career at Harvard as a failure and declared that it had left him with no position in the world.

Nothing else broadens the mind of a bright boy so much as the privilege of early association with great men. One of the advantages of the smaller American colleges of the past was the opportunity which their students enjoyed of intercourse with professors instead of tutors—with intellectual leaders of proved ability, rather than with those whose capacity was in the process of development.

Henry Adams was early thrown into contact with distinguished Bostonians at his father's house in Mount Vernon street.

Among these he mentions John G. Palfrey, Richard H. Dana and Charles Sumner. Palfrey's name is unknown to the younger generation of readers of the present day, and Richard H. Dana is remembered only as the author of *Two Years Before the Mast*, although he was at one time a prominent figure in Massachusetts and national politics.

R. H. Dana and Charles Sumner.

"Dana's ideal of life was to be a great Englishman with a seat on the front benches of the House of Commons until he should be promoted to the woolsack; beyond all, with a social status that should place him above the scuffle of provincial and unprofessional annoyances." Henry Adams says his mind "was aristocratic to the tenth degree." Sumner was more attractive to the boy than either of the others; Henry fairly worshipped him. Sumner, like Richard H. Dana, valued and cultivated his relations with English people of prominence. "He was rarely without a pocket full of letters from duchesses or noblemen in England." On account of his bitter anti-slavery sentiments he was socially ostracized in Boston at this period, and therefore valued his connection with English society all the more. "While Sumner had neither wife nor household and was the most socially ambitious of all and the most hungry for what used to be called polite society, he could enter hardly half a dozen houses in Boston."

He was always welcome, however, at the house of Senator Lodge's father in Beacon street, and Longfellow stood by him in Cambridge. At the present day, when the name of Sumner stands out in our national history as that of one of the great and honored leaders of the anti-slavery movement, it is difficult to realize that there ever could have been a time when he was banned by the best people of his own State.

The Boy and the Books.

Henry Adams tells us that the influences under which he grew up, while he was preparing for college, were purely political and literary. So far as religion was concerned, he and his brothers and sisters found even the mild discipline of the Unitarian Church too irksome, so that "they all threw it off at the earliest possible moment and never afterward entered a church." Charles Francis Adams was in the habit of reading aloud to his children the speeches of Horace Mann, the *Biglow Papers* and the poems of Longfellow and Tennyson as fast as they appeared; but he permitted them to read Dickens and Thackeray for themselves. His library was full of eighteenth century history and poetry in which the boy browsed in a desultory way; "but when his father offered his own set of Wordsworth as a gift on condition of reading it through he declined. Pope and Gray called for no mental effort; they were easy reading, but the boy was 30 years old before his education reached Wordsworth."

The class lists of Harvard College show that Henry Adams stood precisely in the middle of his class. His literary abilities, however, must have been highly appreciated by his fellows, for they chose him to be their class orator—a flattering choice, inasmuch as Class Day in the eyes of the students was the most important function in the entire college course. His speech was praised for the perfect self-possession manifested by the orator; which prompts him to observe that if Harvard College gave the student nothing else, it gave calm. He was inclined to think that it gave him little more. He says the four years passed at college were, for his purpose, wasted.

"Harvard College was a good school, but at bottom what the boy disliked most was any school at all." He never learned even the alphabet of mathematics; he got nothing from the ancient languages but two or three Greek plays, and in political economy he was taught nothing of the doctrine of Karl Marx nor anything about capital!" The only teaching that appealed to his imagination was a course of lectures by Louis Agassiz on the glacial period and palæontology, which had more influence on his curiosity than the rest of the college instruction altogether."

Off to Europe.

He regarded Harvard as having been a negative force in his life—erroneously as we think—and as having been chiefly valuable in weakening the violent political bias of his childhood. The truth is that he was a gentleman already and Harvard made him a scholar. He says he ran through libraries of volumes which he forgot, even to their title pages; but the fact remains that he would never have become the accomplished historian and man of letters into which he subsequently developed if he had not gone to Harvard College.

The next step in the education of Henry Adams was a visit to Germany to study the civil law at the University of Berlin. He crossed the ocean in November, 1858, on the Cunard steamer Persia, the newest, largest and fastest steamship then afloat—commanded by the famous Captain Judkins. The chapter of the autobiography in which he narrates the failure of this Berlin experiment abounds in delicious satire.

None of the many services rendered by the Adams family to this nation is more worthy of admiration than the calm steadfastness with which Charles Francis Adams upheld the cause of the United States as our Minister to England during the civil war. Henry Adams, in the capacity of private secretary, gained the most intimate knowledge of the strenuous diplomacy of that period. This he recounts in several chapters of his autobiography which constitute a valuable contribution to the history of our foreign relations in a time that tried men's souls. Gladstone's extraordinary attitude in favor of the Southern Confederacy was evidently as much of a mystery to the American Minister's private secretary as it has always been to the rest of the world.

We have followed the career of Henry Adams far enough to indicate the attractiveness of this book. It has been highly and deservedly praised. To appreciate it to the full the reader must know something more than it tells him concerning the many men and women mentioned by the author. In other words, Henry Adams assumes the possession of a very extensive fund of information on the part of those who shall peruse this intimate personal narrative of his life. It is much more, however, than a mere autobiography. Mingled all through the story of his career we find a multitude of reflections, sagacious, suggestive, humorous and satirical, on almost every subject that has interested mankind in America during the last sixty years. No recently published book contains so many quotable passages.

THE EDUCATION OF HENRY ADAMS. By HENRY ADAMS. Houghton Mifflin Company. $5.